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Work based projects: creating meaningful learning experiences for workplace impact

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Higher education institutions have developed postgraduate work based curricula to incorporate employer perspectives regarding the learning and development needs of the professional workforce. Within these work based curricula there is an assumption that work based projects have some sort of utility and impact for the work place alongside the student's own professional development. To develop the pedagogical practices of our work based project offering, we undertook a small scale explorative qualitative study to investigate the utility of these projects by interviewing practitioner students' up to two years post graduation about the impact of their project. The findings from the thematic analysis of the narrative interview data identified that project impact was related to four themes: development of project skills, professional progression and reputation, alignment with workplace priorities, and engagement with colleagues and stakeholders. The discussion presents how we have used our understandings of the themes to inform our work based pedagogy in respect of practitioner students' post graduate projects. The impact of work based projects from the perspectives of the employer and organisation needs further investigation.

Key words: work based project, project impact, narrative, work based pedagogy

Introduction

Universities are increasingly being asked to take employers' perspectives and organisational and professional learning needs of their students into account when designing curricula (Department of Education 2017). Several higher education institutions have developed postgraduate work based curricula as a response to such regulatory requests. Within these master level programmes students undertake a work based research project of relevance to their professional workplace. Sometimes the projects are also of relevance and interest to the wider professional community of the student.

In terms of the practitioner students¹ related to the work based project offering reported in this paper, they are generally in roles which carry organisational responsibility within health, social care and educational practice settings. The work based project undertaken in these settings is aimed at practice / service change and development but may take the form of an organisational, service or practice evaluation as a basis for future change and development. There is an assumption that such postgraduate work based projects have some sort of utility and impact for the work place alongside the student's own professional development. This is implicit in the programme and module learning outcomes and also in the partnership working the university has with the sponsoring organisations of the students.

To develop the pedagogical practices of our work based project module, we undertook a small scale explorative interview qualitative study to investigate the utility of these projects with students' up to two years post graduation about the impact of their project. We were particularly interested to know if in the doing of these projects practice is actually developed as well as leadership capabilities necessary for organisational change and development. The study is small scale and developmental for local purposes. The main purpose of the paper is to share our insights from undertaking the research about actual and potential impact and how we have used these understandings to inform our teaching practice.

Work based projects

The distinguishing feature of a work based project undertaken as part of an academic award is that it is undertaken by the practitioner student as part of their professional practice in a specific work context or setting. It is purposeful and driven by inquiry and development activities around specific issues in their setting (Costley et al 2010; Costley and Abukari 2015). For example, the project may be triggered by the need to solve a work-based problem; to review an aspect of working practice or to introduce a new way of working. Sekaran and Bougie (2016 p2) describe business research as '*a systematic and organised effort to investigate a specific problem encountered in the work setting that needs a solution*'. Such a definition is appropriate for all organisations seeking to investigate and find solutions to

¹ We use this term to describe health, social care and education professionals who are also undertaking post graduate University study.

problems encountered work settings. Boud, Costley and Nottingham (2018) emphasize the importance of the 'real life' 'real time' purpose of a student work based project that has specific objectives for specific aspects of practice within an organization. The assumption is that the project is attuned to organizational directives and policies. It is the context specificity and systematic characteristics of work based projects that make taking such an approach to post graduate projects particularly appropriate for practitioner students. However Portwood (2007) identifies a tension of work places and universities in the undertaking of projects:

workplace projects are intended to satisfy the criterion of fitness for purpose; that is prioritising the utilitarian interests of the organization by whatever means. Whereas universities emphasise fitness of purpose, that is using justified and approved means to achieve whatever ends.

In further development of these ideas Portwood formulated four key design features of work based projects (see Volante et al, 2017) as 'intention, initiation , implementation and impact' providing a useful framework for the type of focussed and meaningful projects required of practitioner students undertaking a postgraduate work based project. The intention or clear purpose related to developing practice drives the project throughout and means that the methodology needs to be pragmatic and fit for purpose. Work based projects necessitate the practitioner to contemplate and reflect with others as part of the processes of inquiry undertaken in work settings. Constable (2017) is of the view that work based projects grounded in practitioner inquiry often use action research approaches to support change and development. As regards implementation, the process of the inquiry and the engagement involved as an insider stands out in work based projects and can be collaborative and educative for all participants. Outcomes need to be evaluated and ongoing action and development planned for.

In terms of outcomes Portwood (2007) suggests that student work based projects can be 'informative, reformatory or transformative'. As part of Master's awards we would expect projects to go beyond the 'informative' and be at least 'reformatory' developing, reorganising, changing and improving existing practice and services, with the more innovative projects having the potential to be 'transformative.' In NHS settings in the United Kingdom the

projects that the practitioner students undertake are usually classified by the Research Health Authority (2017) as a service evaluation, audit or improvement project rather than 'research' because they are considered lacking in generalisability. Student work based projects involve some type of systematic inquiry or evaluation of practice that can inform improvement or change or development of specific practices in specific settings rather than drawing conclusions that are generalisable. That said these projects often result in a useful outcome for the organisation e.g. recommendations, a new strategy, procedures, training programme alongside student achievement. In Portwood's (2007) terms work based projects have consequences for both the student and the work setting.

Some recent examples of MSc work based projects illustrate the emphasis of purpose, outcome and potential impact:

- 'Improving compliance to clinical guidelines' (2016)
- 'Developing strategies to improve workforce retention across the xxx commissioning groups 2016-19'
- 'Developing a direct referral pathway into the xxx Rapid Response Team' (2018)
- 'Production of a toolkit for disseminating learning from mental health homicides for NHS England' (2017)

Impact

Impact of research is traditionally judged on research output (publications) and knowledge transfer (citations). However, Cleary et al (2013) also identify clinical implementation; community benefit and policy enactment as key areas for measuring impact of health research. Applying the traditional conceptualisation of the impact of academic research to work based projects is for the most part a misconception given the particularity and context specific nature of many work based projects. This is not to say that impact as transferability of findings and development processes from one organisation to another or within an organisation does not occur, rather that such emerging impact is challenging to capture unless it is tracked.

Educational evaluation impact studies do not have a strong presence in the literature.

Costley and Abukari (2015) reworked respondent data from a larger evaluation to show the impact of work based research projects at master and doctorate level. The data sets from alumni graduates were merged as both levels of work based project held a similar pedagogical approach. Impact as enhanced personal and professional confidence and credibility is attributed to the individual '*the change in employees themselves provided the impact*' (p 9). Similarly the analysis of professional doctorates (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016) identified personal and career development as impact. Rather than conceptualising such development at the individual level, an alternative view is that the development of new capabilities through undertaking a work based research project creates new possibilities for interaction with peers and managers and colleagues in their communities. Growth of confidence, credibility and career development through work based projects becomes more of a social impact given that these projects and associated outcomes are dependent on the context of the work situation. There is a tendency to conceptualise 'impact' as something which happens after the completion of a work based project rather than an ongoing process during and beyond the completion of the project (Mellors-Bourne et al., 2016; Volante et al., 2017). Understandings of impact may be better served when understood as an emergent process of the interplay of structure and agency during the life of the work based project.

Research design

The study took the form of a focused interview since all the participants had had the experience of undertaking a work based project. Undertaking a work based project involves processes that engender development and change. To capture what alumni considered the impact of these processes 2 years post graduation we used an interpretive approach using narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2018). A characteristic of this type of interview is how the interviewee responds shapes the course of the interview. In this way it is the perspective of the interviewee that is surfaced during the interview rather than that of the researcher. At the beginning the focus is on the practitioner student construction of the impact of their project rather than the researcher construction of impact framed in questions of about the uptake of project recommendations.

Sample

We used a purposeful sample of practitioner students who worked in health, social care or education settings and had graduated and completed the project, within the last 2 years. Twenty alumni were invited to participate using an email invitation. We know that these students are a mobile workforce and in the end we managed to recruit six students. Two were from higher education, three were senior nurses from the NHS and one was a senior nurse in a private health organisation.

Data generation

A narrative interview was used asking the participants to tell using their experiences what they consider the impact of the work based project was. Drawing on Rosenthal's (2018) principle of openness in interviewing we asked a single open question:

We are interested in the impact of students' work based projects after they have graduated from the university. Please tell me the story of the impact of your project since you submitted it up until now?

On reflection we possibly might have created an even more open question: 'we are interested in the impact of students' work based projects. Please tell me your story of the impact of your project'. This insight is in response to the narrative account from one of the participants who talked about what happened at the very beginning of the project and which had an effect on the impact of the project within the organization. This was particularly informative for us indicating that impact processes need to be addressed at the beginning of the project. The open question was followed by specific questions that the researcher was interested in eg uptake of recommendations, barriers and challenges.

The interview was conducted using Skype or over the telephone and recorded. One telephone interview did not record and so the notes taken by the interviewer during the interview and written up post interview. The interviews lasted for 40-50 minutes. The other digital recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

To understand what was common across the cases in relation to the impact of work based projects a thematic analysis was undertaken using the analytic framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). The flexible nature of thematic analysis was appropriate for this exploratory study. To some extent points raised by participants in the initial narrative were able to be explored in more depth through the subsequent questions.

The narrative data from each participant's response to the initial open question was first read through thoroughly and coded to identify individual comments of interest. These were then considered, interpreted and grouped around themes prevalent across the data set. How the practitioner student chose to share their project experience, for example what they chose to share first was also considered, as this gave some insight into what they considered most important or relevant in terms of their project and its impact. This analysis particularly fed into the first two themes below although points raised around engagement were also relevant to the other themes.

The analysis of the responses to the subsequent questions followed the same process; however this was less inductive and more focussed on the particular aspects of interest to us around the extent of the uptake of their project recommendations, barriers and challenges. Extracts from the participant's transcripts were chosen to illustrate the themes and the points being made. Some limited comparison was made between the narrative of the nurse educators and that of the senior nurse professionals.

Ethics

The study was reviewed and given approval by Middlesex University Health and Social Care Research Ethics Committee. While we might have increased the sample size by inviting students currently undertaking their work based project, this was not possible since the writers are also assessors for these students' work. Participant information and consent forms were emailed in advance and consent was either returned by email or confirmed at the start of the interview. Participants were advised that should they wish to withdraw the data

after the interview this would need to be done within 7 days because after then the data would have been anonymised and data analyses started.

Findings

From the analysis of the narrative accounts project impact is related to four themes:

- 1) development of project skills,
- 2) professional progression and reputation,
- 3) alignment with workplace priorities, and
- 4) engagement with colleagues and stakeholders.

Each of these themes is now explored in turn.

1. Development of project skills

All the practitioner students told us, albeit in different ways, how undertaking the project had developed their skills and confidence for leading practice development work. This was as well as their learning around improving the specific area of practice they may have focussed on in their project. Susan says of her project to improve the pain management of elderly patients:

But it (the project) probably offered me other things in the sense of not directly linked to my project but things in increasing my confidence and leadership skills, which is what I need at the moment with my new role

She went on to say:

It's really hard to explain but it's almost the way that you think and the way that you approach things, and giving you the confidence in knowing that when you can achieve something like that, which is incredibly difficult and involves a lot of work as well; managing time, I think it teaches you how to manage your time quite well. And I think in this sort of setting at this level an MSC, it helps for me at the beginning of my lead nurse career, it's a good stepping point for my critical thinking and development skills.

They also told us how the project experience had developed their thinking around how to approach practice development. For example Mary said *'it has really developed the way I think about problems.....it's a whole new world ([since my project]'*.

Hilary a nurse educator said:

Yeah well it started me on this process that's become second nature to me now'I'm still going with my evaluation! I don't feel like my project has ever ended, it's just carrying on! But I just don't write about it now!

Importantly, all the students highlighted that these skills and ways of thinking were transferable to other situations and projects. The work based project is a process that they will carry to new contexts, problems and challenges.

Helen said that she now critically evaluates work in other areas (having developed these skills in this project). She said her project started off developing the way students were prepared for their practical assessments (OSCE) *'but actually the way it informed my practice was more (about) how it informed what I was doing on a different module.'*

Kim now an NHS quality improvement manager told us that:

My project is Influencing the job I do now. Through my work based project I learned how to lead quality improvement. ..using a model for improvement, using data to drive improvement, the importance of strong leadership...the way I set up the team...how to share and teach others.

Another way that learning from the projects was being 'transferred' to other situations was through the students sharing their learning with others. Some of this appeared to be an informal sharing of findings, with their colleagues gradually taking on some of their suggestions. Hilary, a nurse educator who developed and evaluated a blended learning approach to one of her modules, told us:

So I think again it's that slow drip-drip effect. People know about my project, I've talked about my project, So it's maybe a little bit Chinese whispers but people know what other people are

doing within the department, so I'm sure that slow drip-drip effect, people are starting to think about changing their way of working. Yeah, so it's quite interesting. I feel like we're slowly pulling everybody towards blended learning!

However Simon noted that when colleagues just see the project as 'Simon's project' or they don't see the issue as important or of their concern, then they can be quite resistant to taking on recommendations. Most of the students had also shared the learning from their projects more directly at staff workshops or training sessions. Some had also presented their project findings at conferences. Something they were very proud of.

2. Professional progression and reputation

All four of the senior nurse professionals had had a promotion to a more senior role since their MSc graduation and they all discussed in some detail how undertaking the project in particular, had contributed to their promotion and professional progression. Kim was quite clear:

the biggest impact of my project was getting the new job [as associate director]''The MSc was crucial for my career progression. It gave me so much more credibility. The work based aspect put me ahead of others...it gave me a specific focus able to discuss at interview.

This would suggest that their NHS and private Healthcare employers were interested how their organisations might benefit by the transfer of the capabilities that these practitioners had developed through undertaking the work based project. Mary gained a new role Clinical Nurse Specialist in Dialysis 'My prospective employers certainly recognised its [the project's] worth and wanted me to lead on developing a new training facility.'

Simon stressed that the project had increased his reputation and credibility (around this particular aspect of practice - Clinical guidelines) and together with his new more senior role provided further opportunities for dissemination and a more 'effective voice'. Simon (talking of starting in his new role in a different Trust):

*They knew I'd done this piece of work so they asked me to join the paediatric guidelines group
..... Also I'm now disseminating my learning actively in my new Trust. I'm giving a presentation
to junior doctors about how to write guidelines.*

He commented that this was actually easier in his new trust where they already saw him as an expert in this area, than in his old team where they tended to see it just as 'Simon's project' and not their concern.

3. Alignment with workplace priorities

The practitioner students' response to the specific questions we asked about the extent of adoption or implementation of their project recommendations, gave us some insight into what could facilitate adoption and wider influence. They all talked about having to personally take a lead to drive any change but fed back that this could be difficult without the engagement of others or having sufficient influence. The implication was that without wider engagement or support their project would not have any impact beyond developing their own practice. The two nurse educators spoke mostly about how the project helped them develop their own teaching and assessment practice and how based on the positive outcomes, they were now implementing the new strategies in other modules. Although they encouraged others to try some of their ideas (around blended learning methods, flipped classroom, online support), as relatively new lecturers they needed the support of a manager or senior colleague to 'drive' these developments more widely in their department.

Helen went on to highlight that managers were more likely to follow up project recommendations if they supported a department priority such as to improve students' satisfaction and the national students survey (NSS) scores:

*you sometimes need someone to pick you up on it. And so that was one of the things I did say
to the managers, that actually because obviously our NSS wasn't very good. So the managerial
structure is very much focussing on that at the moment.*

She went on to explain that her project had provided some evidence of increased student satisfaction and she used this to encourage her managers to consider her suggestions.

Alignment with workplace priorities was echoed by Kim the NHS quality improvement manager, saying that take up of project recommendations was more likely if it fitted with the wider strategic direction of the organisation.

4. Engaging with colleagues and stakeholders

Having support from senior colleagues to enable implementation and wider influence was also identified as being important by the NHS senior nurses. Kim talked about the need for facilitation by a '*champion*' who supported the recommendations to help drive change forward '*executive sponsorship is key*' she said. Simon went further saying that it was important to know who to engage with and to build a working relationship with these people:

Well, the best example I can think of is the clinical guidelines committee obviously was key. I needed their engagement' 'I've got to really need to work with these people and engage with this committee, partly because I need information they've got, but also for this work to go forward and for it to have momentum and impact, it's got to go through these individuals.

Susan talking of the difficulties with wider dissemination of her project recommendations for improving the pain experience of elderly patients:

I think one of the other big barriers is the large organisation, to be honest; it's a massive trust and trying to know the key people and infiltrate yourself into all these areas is quite a task actually, and that includes the three sites that we work across.'.....so most of my powerful people that I know I suppose work in surgery, so I think that's where there is a bit of a downfall: it's an area where we don't have as much links with, which does make it difficult. I think if it was surgery it would actually be much easier for me to get more of an impact on what's going on.

The nurse educators talked more about the importance of local engagement with department colleagues as there was sometimes resistance to new practice ideas, if it changed established ways of doing things or they didn't see the ideas as relevant to themselves. In line with NHS improvement guidance (2005) to '*involve staff teams in analysing the causes of quality problems and contributing to improvement ideas*', Simon in particular saw the importance of

actively engaging colleagues in the project from an early stage. Simon summarised these two stages to engagement:

It's better to take your time, involve the juniors from the beginning in developing a guideline that works for them, that's user friendly and then having champions in the different clinical areas that will disseminate it.

Discussion: developing work-based project pedagogy

The narrative accounts of impact from the perspective of the practitioner student tell us about the capabilities developed through undertaking work based projects, that both they and the employer value in relation to healthcare and education workplaces. The findings around the development of transferable capabilities confirm earlier research by Costley and Abukari (2015) in their research of project impact. The accounts also give some insight into specific aspects of project leadership and understanding of impact that can inform the design and delivery of work based projects within post graduate curricula.

The development of our own work based pedagogy has been two fold. Firstly there has been greater focus on developing student's knowledge and understanding of impact and how to plan and undertake work based projects for change and development. Secondly, further teaching, learning and assessment strategies have been introduced to develop professional engagement and project leadership skills. These priorities are made explicit in the module learning outcomes against which the student will be assessed.

Right at the outset at project proposal stage, students are now required to consider strategic objectives or quality priorities of the organisation or department (depending on seniority), as well as their own area of interest, to support the project rationale.

Developing student's knowledge and understanding of impact

Practitioner students are introduced during the project proposal module to the work of Clarke et al (2017) to carry out an initial situational analysis of the workplace situation in which the

project will be undertaken. This supports them to:

Critically evaluate complex practice/organisational issues and analyse the influence of current policy, organisational context/priorities, practice and academic literature, to provide a clear rationale and direction for a work based project.

Driver diagrams (NHS Improvement 2018a) may be useful here to align their project aims to workplace objectives. Also from proposal stage they are required to consider the sustainability of the proposed project and how outcomes will be monitored and evaluated. As has been explored more fully by Costley and Nottingham (2017) use of a wide range of literature is encouraged for work based projects drawing on professionally generated materials and in our practitioner students' situation, to explore ideas of current best practice. More consideration is given to situated knowledge and students are encouraged to make greater use of existing data sources, existing professional networks and purposeful professional discussions.

As Costley and Abukari (2005 p4) state' *practitioner researchers are engaged in solving highly contextualised problems*' and therefore it is incumbent upon pedagogical practices to support students to recognise and address the complexity of the context within which the work based project is situated. Situatedness arises from the interplay of the practitioner researcher and the work place situation context of the here and now as well as the sociohistorical context pertaining to the multiple perspectives operating in the work place. An understanding of all this complexity is required at the beginning if the work based project is to have any impact at all within the organisation and or on work practices.

The two themes of aligning work place priorities and engagement with colleagues and stakeholders have informed our new pedagogical practice. While the university is conferring an award on an individual for their personal academic achievement, these capabilities came about by being situated in the social context of the work place situation. To take on board project impact as an accomplishment of the social situation of the workplace we introduce students early to Clarke et al's (2017) mapping of all the

potentially analytically pertinent human [individuals, groups, organisations, institutions, subcultures] and nonhuman, material and symbolic / discursive elements' in the situation of inquiry. Who and what are in this situation? Who and what else may matter in this situation? What other elements make a difference in this situation' ... what nonhuman things really matter in this situation of inquiry? To whom or what do they matter? what ideas, concepts, discourses, symbols, sites of debate and cultural "stuff" may matter in this situation? (Clarke et al, p127).

By analysing their insider knowledge of the work situation they begin to make the familiar strange and to start to understand what is feasible if the project is to have impact. Mapping out the work based project situation before any conversation about methods, we have begun to attend to Portwood's emphasis on project intentions. As made clear through the thematic analysis, the work place situation, intention and work based project impact are interconnected. Undertaking a situational analysis raises student awareness of the constraints and enablements of the work situation for project intentions and to understand what is feasible in relation to organisational goals and priorities.

The work based project curriculum supports practitioner students to consider inquiry methodologies which are fit for their particular purpose and context and not to be constrained by pre conceived ideas of research methods. They are required to

Systematically and critically apply relevant inquiry methodologies and improvement strategies to practice/organisational issues, within a work based project that has the potential to transform practice.

Students are signposted to NHS improvement models such as Plan, Do, Study Act (PDSA) cycles (NHS Improvement 2018b) and Quality and Service Improvement (QSIR) tools (NHS Improvement 2018c) which they may find useful to provide an appropriate approach and methodology. For health practitioner students this also helps them align their projects with work place initiatives identified in the findings as being crucial for take up of project recommendations.

The learning outcomes of the work based project module already required² students to combine advanced research and analytical skills with taking active responsibility for the leading and evaluation of a work based project that had the potential to transform practice. This is also explicit in the new curriculum with students being required to

Systematically analyse findings and critically evaluate the outcomes of a work based project, action plan and disseminate outcomes appropriately.

However the interviews have given us insight into the need for practitioner students to consider project impact more as an interaction of what is afforded by both their organisational situation and their own developing capabilities. The findings show the lasting importance of the project management and leadership skills gained and these are now given greater emphasis in the curriculum and more explicitly assessed:

Demonstrate responsibility and leadership for strategic or improvement initiatives and the effective management of a work based project.

The importance of engaging with stakeholders was demonstrated in the findings and the project curriculum has been developed to include greater consideration of strategies for engagement, identifying key stakeholders, encouraging a shared vision and teamwork. Students are signposted to tools to support stakeholder analysis relevant to their professional fields (Martin et al 2010, Thompson 2002, NHS Education for Scotland 2017).

Teaching, learning and assessment strategies

As consistently espoused by Boud (2010, 2014) assessment activities should promote relevant employment skills as well as assess knowledge. Students are assessed on *Effective engagement, networking and communication with relevant stakeholders and academic audiences*. To facilitate the development of these professional engagement skills, various learning and assessment activities have been specifically designed. A group supervision model for the MSc work based projects has been developed to encourage a community of

² Acknowledgement to Barbara Workman (2010) and the Middlesex University Institute of Work Based Learning for earlier iterations of the work based project module.

practice and greater peer to peer learning. Students are challenged to critically explore their approach not only with an academic supervisor but with other senior practitioners who may bring other best practice ideas from a range of organisations and professions. The Higher Education Academy (HEA 2012) stresses the importance of assessment 'for' learning as well as assessment 'of' learning and to this end a group seminar presentation of their project and its outcomes is part of the final project assessment and replaces an individual dissertation viva. This enables students to practice advanced presentation skills that can support their workplace dissemination and discussion of project outcomes.

Finally students are required to actively reflect on their own professional development through *Critical reflection and evaluation of own practice and systematic professional development*. The narrative accounts offered by the six alumni are a testament to the power of the work based project to change and develop individual lives as well as colleagues and organisational practices.

Conclusion

This small qualitative interview study of MSc practitioner students following graduation provides some insight into the impact of work based projects within master academic awards. Four key themes emerged from the analysis:

- 1) development of project skills,
- 2) professional progression and reputation,
- 3) alignment with workplace priorities, and
- 4) engagements with colleagues and stakeholders.

Analysis of the student stories around these key themes has illuminated our understanding of impact conceptualised as an interactive process of the practitioner student emergent capabilities and workplace contexts.

The findings have informed the pedagogy and development of the work based project module. There is now greater emphasis in the curriculum on aligning projects with quality imperatives and strategic objectives. Practitioner students are encouraged to engage with a range of practice literature and to draw on a range of methodologies including improvement strategies that may be relevant to their specific professional contexts. Teaching, learning and assessment methods aim to develop transferable project skills such as professional engagement and dissemination. There has been some debate amongst the university teaching team about how to balance these pragmatic inquiry approaches with the academic rigor required at Master level.

Further study will be needed to evaluate the impact of these curriculum developments on the effectiveness of work based projects both for the student's professional career and for the development of actual practice with patients/clients in their settings. The employer and organisational perspective on the impact of work based projects needs further investigation.

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